



Beatriz Manz, with Juan Osorio, a K'iche' Maya from Santa María Tzejá, on the trail to that village in Ixcán, Guatemala, circa 1986.

Photo by Derrill Bazzy

Remembering the Past, Looking to the Future

by Beatriz Manz

In July 1973, I first walked the muddy, arduous path to the village of Santa María Tzejá in the Ixcán rainforest. Little did I realize the journey would last 40 years.

“If the bones of the dead speak,
why should the living keep quiet?”

– Humberto Ak'abal, K'iche' Maya poet



Photo courtesy of Beatriz Manz.

Paratroopers in a Catholic Church building, Nebaj, Guatemala, March 1983.

I took this photo in the Ixil region in March 1983 to show how soldiers were occupying buildings abandoned by the Catholic Church. Bishop Juan Gerardi had closed down the diocese of El Quiché in 1980 because of the escalating number of priests, nuns, catechists, and health and education promoters who had been murdered. It was the first time that the Catholic Church had left a region as a result of violence since the Spanish conquest.

Years later, this photo proved much more important than I could have imagined at the time. Survivors claimed that parachutists operated in the Ixil area, but the military repeatedly denied that there was any such unit. This photo, which shows a soldier wearing a T-shirt bearing the insignia of the parachutists' unit, proved that the unit did indeed exist.

In the last several years, the military has conducted a widespread counter-insurgency campaign designed to disrupt the base of support for the guerrillas. An important part of this campaign involved terrorizing the defenseless civilian population through individual disappearances and assassinations and the massacres of entire communities... Overall the results of this military campaign were staggering.

– Beatriz Manz, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, “Developments in Guatemala and U.S. Options,” Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, February 20, 1985.



Rancho Puerto Rico Camp, Lacandón rainforest, Chiapas, Mexico, November 1982.

Photo courtesy of Beatriz Manz.

News was filtering out of Guatemala that thousands of *campesinos* were fleeing to southern Mexico to escape the violence. In November 1982, there were already 36,000 Guatemalans in refugee camps along the border and tens of thousands more spread across Mexico. I decided to find these refugees and take their testimonies. I knew that the Mexican government was not keen on anyone going into the Lacandón rainforest and that officials had made this very clear to Mexican reporters. The government's attempt to make the refugee camps off-limits made me even more determined to attempt to enter the Lacandón.

I hired a small plane in Comitán, a city in the state of Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border. We headed east, and I photographed the border from the sky. The pilot landed in a grass clearing in the jungle. When I got out of the plane, I asked him to return in a week. From there, I hiked into the dense rainforest, where I found a Mexican with a dugout canoe who knew how to navigate the Lacantún River. He took me to a makeshift camp that housed thousands of Guatemalan refugees. Seeing the suffering of the refugees — many of whom arrived in the camp hungry, wounded, and near death — was the most wrenching experience of all my years doing fieldwork in Guatemala.

The insecurity of the peasants is reflected by the continued presence of an estimated 150,000 Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, 46,000 of whom are in officially recognized camps in southern Mexico. These peasants did not abandon their homes, land, and communities lightly. Many were the survivors of massacres in their own villages or witness to the destruction of neighboring villages. An official Guatemalan census lists 51,144 children who have lost one or both of their parents in the departments of El Quiché, Chimaltenango, and San Marcos. The total figure of children who lost parents is estimated to be 100,000 for the country.

— Beatriz Manz, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Developments in Guatemala and U.S. Options," Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, February 20, 1985.



Photo courtesy of Beatriz Manz.

On the road to the Ixil region, Guatemala, March 1983.

I knew the road to the Ixil region from my first trip to Guatemala in 1973. When I returned in 1983, after the military had begun its scorched earth counterinsurgency campaign, everything had changed. Where there had once been homes and cornfields, there were only ashes. It felt like not an insect was left alive.

Mostly, I photographed from the road, but at one point, I decided to go up to a burnt house. There, in the rubble, I saw a girl's black shoe. A jolt went through me, a visceral realization of the desolation, the devastation. To whom did this shoe belong? What happened to her?

Hundreds of villages and thousands of homes like this one were burned to the ground.

Terror has become an accepted part of the arsenal of the military.

— Beatriz Manz, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Developments in Guatemala and U.S. Options," Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, February 20, 1985.



Photo courtesy of Beatriz Manz.

The "model village" of La Pista, Ixil region, Guatemala, March 1983.

Since the Spanish conquest, the Mayans have been viewed as an available labor force. The military offensive into isolated areas in the 1980s produced hundreds of massacres, destroyed homes and fields, and displaced more than one million people. Many survivors hid in the mountains and rainforest. Some of these desperate people, often driven by hunger and poor health, decided to put their fate in the hands of the military, which forced them to live in highly controlled settlements ludicrously dubbed "model villages." In addition to the controls and the psychological operations they endured, the men had to perform forced labor. They patrolled the countryside, looking for insurgents, and they built roads, literally moving mountains with picks and shovels.

A further component of this occupation are the "model villages." These settlements are designed by the military to be strategic concentrations of peasants whose movements can be closely monitored and controlled. In addition, the army is seeking to transform the attitudes and living patterns of these indigenous peoples through "reeducation."

– Beatriz Manz, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Developments in Guatemala and U.S. Options," Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, February 20, 1985.

... the lifestyles and traditions, in fact, the culture of the indigenous population [are] being forcefully transformed...

The civil patrols are especially noteworthy both because of their pervasiveness and their disruptive effect on communities. There are about 900,000 patrolmen... most of the patrols are concentrated among the 4 million people of the highlands who are overwhelmingly Indian... [this] system of compulsory policing and vigilante service... is unpaid and obligatory.

– Beatriz Manz, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, "Developments in Guatemala and U.S. Options," Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, February 20, 1985.



Photo courtesy of Beatriz Manz.

A civil patrol (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil, PAC), Ixil region, Guatemala, March 1983.

Men forced to build a road, Ixil region, Guatemala, March 1983.



Photo courtesy of Beatriz Manz.